The way it goes:

Epistemic and methodological encounters

of intersectionality

Enzo Colombo
University of Milan, Italy

Paola Rebughini
University of Milan, Italy

Abstract

Today intersectionality is considered an epistemic perspective useful for understanding the coexistence of domination and agency; the aim of this article is to expand research on intersectionality. We develop this purpose by highlighting the intersection as the locus where the meaning and social relevance of the categories take shape in their reciprocal interaction. Developing a dialogue with the seminal Leslie McCall's analysis, the article explores the best combination of methods with which to investigate what happens at the intersection, and how the different combinations of intersections modify, through time and space, the strength and subjective experience of the different categorizations.

Keywords: category, complex intersection, Leslie McCall, methodology.

Corresponding Author:
Enzo Colombo
University of Milan, Italy
enzo.colombo@unimi.it

_____

1. Dealing with complex intersections

Born within feminist research, the notion of intersectionality is not a unitary framework; rather, it has the vocation to apply to any group of people, to shed light on the changing and multidimensional social locations of people's experiences, and to address the issue of stratification as a problem of both redistribution and recognition (Fraser 1997; Yuval-Davis 2006 and 2011b). As an analytical tool, the intersectionality approach has the purpose of intercepting forms of categorization in terms of advantages and disadvantages. It relates to the distribution of power, and to the differential hierarchical locations of individuals and groups. Consequently, it shows what is at stake in the management of categories to produce hegemonic representations of reality (Davis and Lutz 2022; Davis 2020; Anthias 2021; Lutz *et al*. 2011). Because of this multi-layered potential, intersectionality has been rapidly appropriated and adapted to the specific exigencies of recipients beyond feminist research (Lutz 2016). But it has provoked polemics and theoretical disputes about its use (Carastathis 2014). Currently, the notion is not only commonplace within gender studies; it is also becoming an analytical device widely used in ethnic, racial and social stratification studies to determine how people's lives are shaped by multiple and intersecting systems of categorization.

Overall, the notion of intersectionality has acquired growing importance as a means to reconcile structure and agency without promoting cultural essentialism (Colombo and Rebughini 2016). Hence, whilst originally developed as a conceptual tool to highlight multiple oppressions (Crenshaw 1989), today intersectionality is more often considered an epistemic perspective useful for understanding the co-existence of domination and agency, multiple and complex dynamics of boundary work that produce exclusion and belonging, opportunities and constraints, while also creating space for the tactical use of social categories (Nash 2008; McDowell 2008; Heyse 2010; Purkayastha 2010; Walby *et al*. 2012).

Developing a dialogue with Leslie McCall's (2005) study, the primary purpose of this article is substantive: to expand research on intersectionality. In particular, it explores whether the intersectional perspective – on both an epistemological and a methodological level – can be used to analyse not solely how social location – defined by the intersection among different significant forms of categorization – creates forms of exclusion and privilege. It also seeks to show how the intersection is the locus where the meaning and social relevance of the categories take shape in their reciprocal interaction and how this creates a space of agency – more or less wide – for the subjects (Rebughini 2021).

Indeed, one of the main challenges for intersectionality research in the social sciences is how to select the best combination of methods with which to investigate what happens at the intersection. From a methodological point of view, intersectional research primarily questions the fixed contents and meanings of categories that guide traditional, especially quantitative, methods. This article discusses how categorization can be methodologically grasped as a process. Hence, starting from the seminal work of Leslie McCall (2005), it seeks to understand how methodological problems are connected to some of the core epistemic questions underscored by intersectionality. It considers the epistemic and methodological dimensions as closely intertwined and points out that different epistemic approaches to categories and different methodologies produce different kinds of knowledge.

On the basis of this discussion, we outline an approach to intersectionality as a way to study not only how categories work but also how the *complex intersection* of categories does so by opening or closing spaces for action, resistance, and choice. The aim is to promote an intersectional approach underlining the constitutive interdependencies among different social categories. We seek: (i) to highlight how their intertwining contributes to defining the social position and spaces of action of the subjects; and (ii) how social categories take shape and consistency

precisely in the intertwining and links that they establish with other categories, closing or opening possibilities for subjects' agency, and thereby contribute to both the reproduction and possible transformation of categories themselves. Indeed, intersectionality fosters the recognition that categories are socially constructed; but once they have been produced, they are also 'structural' and able to define the context and to promote some courses of action while hindering others. Categories such as gender, class, age, colour or physical and mental abilities are neither unitary nor universal and fixed; they may change, and people may change them in relation to personal capacity and external conditions.

By critically discussing the well-known *anti-*, *intra-* and *inter-*categorical approaches proposed by McCall, the article suggests a further epistemological perspective – one that we may provisionally call *endocategorical* – which analyses not only the social location produced, here and now, by the intersection of given different categorizations, and undergone by the subject, but also how the different combinations of intersections modify, through time and space, the strength and subjective experience of the different categorizations. In this way, both the socially constructed character of categories and their intersections, as well as the agency space that the different intersections make possible, become evident, highlighting how the subjects negotiate, resist and modify their social position. In other words, this further perspective allows us to underscore that the meaning, strength and effects of individually experienced categories depend on their specific intersection, and the specific contexts of interaction. Gender, class, and 'race' – to consider the basic categories of many reflections on intersectionality – are not defined in unitary and static terms but acquire meaning and relevance as 'social facts' in the connections that they mutually establish from time to time. The multiplicity and fluidity of the categories which, in their intertwining, define and constrain the social position of the subjects in concrete interactions are at the same

time the 'political resource' on which they can rely to develop tactics of resistance and change.

The need to develop a coherent methodology ensues from the epistemological interest in grasping the dynamic aspect of categorical intersections. Consequently, an approach to intersectionality focused on contextualized agency needs a heuristic and methodological tool able to shed light on how social actors deal with social categorizations in their daily lives.

2. Beyond intersection as social location

In her seminal article of 2005, Leslie McCall analysed the epistemological use made of categories in the main feminist international research based on an intersectional approach. The core question put by McCall is '*how* to study intersectionality' (2005, 1771), given that intersectionality has introduced new methodological problems rather than helping to solve them. The article raises two main issues relating to the use of intersectionality. On the one hand, it conceives intersectionality as a critical perspective on complex categorizations. On the other hand, it raises the methodological question of how to incorporate the intersectional perspective into empirical research.

Bringing the question of complex categories to the fore makes it possible to acknowledge intersectionality not only as a political instrument – with which to claim social justice and to empower social groups located at the neglected points of intersection among different forms of social categorization – but also to acknowledge it as a useful concept for analysing the genesis, effects, consistency, stability, and contestability of categories. The focus on complexity makes it possible to shift the attention from the simple or summative effect of single categorizations to the intricate and changing effects of social locations, highlighting the

_____

importance of the accurate analysis of different empirical situations and warning against a simplistic, naturalized and reified use of categories.

McCall highlights three methodological approaches used by feminist researchers to study intersectionality: *anticategorical*, *intracategorical* and *intercategorical complexity*. While, in McCall's reconstruction, anti- and intracategorical perspectives constitute the standard ways to use intersectionality in social research, her proposal consists in introducing an intercategorical perspective that "focuses on the complexity of relationships among multiple social groups within and across analytical categories and not on complexities within single social groups, single categories, or both. The subject is multigroup, and the method is systematically comparative" (Ivi, 1786). This can be done, in her view, using quantitative methodologies, whereas the canon of intersectional studies is mainly based on qualitative methodologies. Hence, the central point of McCall's proposal consists in supporting the need to broaden intersectional analyses by introducing an intercategorical perspective based on quantitative techniques. The intercategorical stance is able to highlight both advantages and disadvantages of the intersection, not in a single person or in a social group but in a comparative way among social groups defined by a given set of categories. However, the main danger is using categories as such, as given, as operative and quantitative variables, underestimating the social complexity at the basis of the intersections, even though McCall believes that "in the end [it] is a synthetic and holistic process that brings the various pieces of the analysis together" (Ivi, 1787), avoiding simply additive modalities.

The field of research outlined by the set of anti-, intra- and intercategorical perspectives is broad and certainly able to bring into focus the complexity of the forms of exclusion and privilege as well as the subjective experience of the different forms of social location. Our interest is to propose a further extension of this analysis – the *endocategorical* approach – focused not only on the social position given by the intertwining of different categories but also on how the categories

themselves work in their intersection, and are transformed by the intersection, producing different possibilities for agency. The idea is that the intersectional perspective can be useful to highlight the constructed, changeable and situated character of the categories and how their intersection constitutes both the meaning and the binding force that the individual categories assume and the variable space of action that is available to subjects in a given situation.

2.1. 'Inter': categories as 'social facts'

The intercategorical approach provisionally adopts existing analytical categories as they are configured in a given social context. Without ignoring or questioning their status as social constructs, an intercategorical perspective assumes, with Durkheim, categories as 'social facts' that impose their relevance and moral force on the reality and experience of individuals and groups by creating specific social hierarchies, asymmetries, privileges and exclusions. An intercategorical perspective is mainly interested in comparing how the different intersections of significant social categories produce forms of social advantage and disadvantage, positions of privilege and exclusion. It recognises that the different categories have no valid effect separately: they have social meaning when accounted for simultaneously, that is, considering their effects as conditional on their intersection (McCall 2005, 1788). This is mainly done using statistical techniques of multiplicative multivariate analysis that require the use of 'interaction effects', 'multilevel', 'hierarchical', 'ecological', or 'contextual' modelling.

In the multiplicative approach, contrary to the additive one (conventional linear regression), the effects of the variables are not considered to be mutually exclusive. It is thus possible to analyse, for instance, how women are differently affected by unemployment on the basis of their location in the system of ethnic categorization and the structure of education. By calculating interaction effects

_____

through multiplicative analysis, the researcher can not only discuss how the positions of the different groups deviate from each other, but s/he can also test whether and how people at different crossroads are affected differently by similar processes (Spierings 2012, 340). The multiplicative approach makes it possible to analyse how women are discriminated against because of the effects of different but intertwined categories. Including multiplicative interaction terms in the analysis makes it possible to assess the combined effects of structural categories, so that categories are not independent of each other, as assumed in the unitary approach.

Interaction effects are introduced into the analysis through cross-product terms created by multiplying two or more of the explanatory variables together (for instance, it is possible to introduce second-order interactions – between gender-ethnicity, gender-class, and ethnicity-class – and third-order interactions – i.e. gender-ethnicity-class). However, multiplicative interaction terms may be very difficult to interpret, especially when interactions between three or more variables are taken into account (Bowleg 2012; Schudde 2018; Bauer *et al*. 2021). Multilevel models, as hierarchical linear models (HLM), offer a more sophisticated approach. They address complexity and variation within groups as well as between levels of analysis, and they reduce aggregation bias and estimation of cross-level interactions (Fehrenbacher and Patel 2020, 152). Despite the accuracy and complexity of the analytical tools, critics (Hancock 2013) highlight that multiple approaches require three assumptions that are not in tune with the intersectionality perspective:

a) the predetermination of categorical relationships: the researcher has to decide *a priori* which categories and which interaction effects should be inserted into the analysis. To make the analysis manageable, the complexity of real experience has to be theoretically reduced to a radical extent. The risk is the reification of different social locations, which are taken for granted in their

specific composition – for instance, considering the social location of poor immigrant women as *a priori* an interesting intersection to be analysed independently from the context, the outcome, or the internal variability of an analytically created group;

b) the use of a static conception of each category: connected with the previous point, the various categories constructing the social location under scrutiny are conceived as fixed regardless of other possible categories that could play a relevant role, the context in which they are analysed, and the specific characteristic of the individuals acting in that social location. The risk is the reification of the categories, assuming, for instance, that gender works in identical manner across different contexts when set in interaction with class and ethnic background;

c) finally, the assumption that cases are uniform within each category: all individuals considered to occupy a specific social location are deemed equivalent and interchangeable. The risk is a deterministic interpretation that denies agency. Individuals are removed from the social scene, and their actions are considered to be completely dependent on their social location and the specific matrix of oppression in which they are trapped.

The intercategorical approach has the indubitable advantage of using a comparative method – supported by statistical techniques that evaluate the level of plausibility – which "analyze the intersection of the full set of dimensions of multiple categories and thus examine both advantage and disadvantage explicitly and simultaneously. It is not the intersection of race, class, and gender in a single social group that is of interest but the relationships among the social groups defined by the entire set of groups constituting each category" (McCall 2005, 1787). However, it is forced to use categorizations in a static way and to limit itself to comparatively examining their effects among different social locations. The focus is on the social

_____

location and its effects, while the way in which the categories are created, interpreted and modified necessarily remains outside the analysis. The latter yields a 'snapshot' of the forms of exclusion, but it is less effective in grasping the historical and dynamic dimension of the social construction of the categories, their variability, and the experience that individuals and groups have of the intertwining of these categories.

2.2. 'Intra': the idiosyncrasies of categories as subjective experiences

The other two perspectives analysed by McCall – anti- and intra-categorical – mainly use qualitative methods and are more attentive to the socially constructed nature of the categories, avoiding their essentialization. Research that can be placed under this label is more widespread and 'canonical', and usually uses qualitative techniques, particularly case studies, ethnography and narrative interviews. However, even these perspectives tend to focus on the analysis of the social location created by the intersections and on the effects that such collocations produce. The socially constructed nature of categories and intersections, rather than being analysed in its specific dynamics, is usually taken for granted and assumed as the critical premise for a good analysis.

The intracategorical perspective focuses on the experience of individuals and groups placed at a specific intersection of meaningful categories. It reveals the complexity of the lived experience of categorization. Here the emphasis is on "the fact that a wide range of different experiences, identities, and social locations fail to fit neatly into any single 'master' category" (McCall 2005, 1777). Moreover, because in this case categories cannot be considered as given, but are instead variable social constructs, McCall considers the intracategorical and anticategorical perspectives to be epistemologically closer in their attempt to analyse power/knowledge dynamics. In her view, for both of them, "the methodological

consequence is to render suspect both the process of categorization itself and any research that is based on such categorization" (Ivi, 1777).

As said, in the intracategorical approach the methodological tool is usually qualitative and based on personal narratives and case studies where it is possible to locate the intersection of multiple categories and how the individual manages them. Consequently, a particular group is often chosen. It is assumed that the more particular and 'new' a case is at the intersection of different forms of categorization, the more interesting it becomes, and the narratives of individuals or their experiences are used as means to illustrate the effects of the intersection. Research therefore focuses on a single group represented by the individuals whose experience is reconstructed and reported. However, this means that the possibility of comparison between different social locations is lost. As McCall (2005, 1781) observes, from an intracategorical perspective:

> an Arab American, middleclass, heterosexual woman is placed at the intersection of multiple categories (race-ethnicity, class, gender, and sexual) but only reflects a single dimension of each. Personal narratives may aspire to situate subjects within the full network of relationships that define their social locations, but usually it is only possible to situate them from the partial perspective of the particular social group under study (i.e., if an Arab woman is the subject of analysis, then issues of race and nationality are more fully examined from the perspective of Arab women than from the perspective of Arab men).

In McCall's analysis, this implies that in the intracategorical approach categories have an ambivalent status; the focus is on the subject of analysis more than on the constitution of categories, because categories are used to define the subjects of the research. The ambivalence is related to the constructivist approach to categories, which are considered by qualitative scholars to be 'misleading constructs'. Researchers use categories with scepticism. The problem here is the construction

_____

of the subject of analysis, while the investigation should leave room for the way in which the subject her/himself uses, experiences, resists and deals with the categorization process. The intercategorical perspective often ends up by equating the categorical intersection with identity. The specific intersection defines the location of the group or individual analysed. Hence, it acts simultaneously as a form of constraint and discipline and as a place for the creation of solidarity, empowerment, and potential political action. Grasping the intersection consists in grasping what feminist thought has termed 'situated knowledge' (Haraway 1988; bell hooks 1991; Harding 1991): that is, knowledge which starts from the subjective experience aware of its social location, at the same time defined by its own specificity and by structural constraints. However, analysis that considers the location created by specific intersection of categories as a form of identity ends up by "focusing primarily on identity categories as distinct variables rather than interactive processes" (Fehrenbacher and Patel 2019, 146).

2.3. 'Anti': contesting categories per se

Finally, in a more explicit manner, research that adopts an *anticategorical* perspective considers the deconstruction of categories as a priority. Categories are considered to be among the main ways in which order is produced and social hierarchies are defined. They constitute the stakes in power relations defining the social distribution of burdens and privileges. In this case, intersectionality is considered to be a counter-hegemonic project connecting different struggles, but whose real aim is not merely to establish connections between categories but to dissolve categories themselves (Hill-Collins 2019, 241). Indeed, categories are nothing more than "simplifying social fictions that produce inequalities in the process of producing differences" (McCall 2005, 1773). In line with a poststructuralist and deconstructivist stance, the *anticategorical* perspective is based on a methodology that deconstructs analytical categories and shows that they cannot be used

in a simplistic manner. The main contribution of the anticategorical perspective is its fundamental questioning of a-historical, unitary, totalizing, and essentializing categories.

The anticategorical perspective is consistent with qualitative methodologies used for intracategorical analysis. As McCall (2005, 1778) notes, "the artificiality of social categories can be illuminated in history with the method of genealogy, in literature with deconstruction, and in anthropology with the new ethnography. In each case, the completeness of the set of groups that constitutes a category is challenged".

The anticategorical perspective criticises analyses that consider the different forms of categorisation as independent, as simply additive. The 'additive approach' ignores the fact that categories intersect in mutually constitutive ways in and through socio-cultural hierarchies and power dimensions that produce complex relations of inclusion, exclusion, domination, and subordination. It disregards the fact that gender, class, race or any other significant form of categorisation does not have just one dimension that adds automatically and without changes to other categorizations. Being a woman – black and socialist feminists contend – assumes different meanings, produces different social locations, and produces different burdens and privileges based on its association with 'race' and class.

The experience of being a woman is inextricably defined not only by gender experience and sensitivity but also by the way in which gender is constituted in relation to 'race' and class (as well as other forms of categorization that assume major significance in specific areas of interaction). As Cathrine Egeland and Randi Gressgård observe (2007, 209): "The additive approach to complexity assumes that such categories as race, class, and gender are related and interacting, but not mutually constituting categories. Race is added to class, that is added to gender, and so on, but the differences that the various intersections actually make cannot

_____

be accounted for through an additive approach, because mere interactions be-tween categories presuppose relatively stable, unified categories". Although the anticategorical perspective has been historically important and, as McCall recog-nises (2005, 1778), "enormously effective in challenging the singularity, separate-ness, and wholeness of a wide range of social categories", it is accused of focusing on a critique of categorizations *per se*.

McCall contends that the anticategorical approach is mainly interested in de-constructing categories, so that it risks not being able to grasp the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion that specific intersections create in the concrete experi-ence of individuals and groups (Ivi, 1779). In this way, it would deconstruct groups and categories that create disadvantage and exclusion, but it would not be able to reconstruct them in such a way as to constitute the basis of identification for emancipating political action capable of challenging and modifying existing forms of power. A purely deconstructive position ends up depriving any group and any form of belonging of meaning; making the political action of discriminated groups difficult (Bagilhole 2010). The accusation is consistent, and it rightly highlights the weaknesses of an academic criticism more concerned with the internal coherence of its own arguments than with comparison against the empirical reality and social experience that make categorizations not only a means of oppression but also in-struments of identification, recognition, and political action.

Nevertheless, a less radical use of anticategorical complexity not only helps to focus on how categories interact but also gives importance to the intra-action be-tween categories (Lykke 2010). In this way, it highlights not only that the different categories are socially constructed but also that the way in which they are con-structed and make sense in a specific context depends on their relationship with other categories. Assuming this perspective enables the researcher to scrutinise how the intersection of, for instance, class, gender and 'race' produces a specific social location as well as to grasp how gender can assume a different value and

constitute specific constraints or resources if someone is a poor black woman or a poor white woman, if s/he is a white immigrant woman or a white immigrant man, etc. In this way, it focuses not only on the formation of social locations, hierarchies and forms of inclusion and exclusion but also on the ways in which categories work, how they assume their specific meaning in relation to other categories, and the spaces of freedom that individuals have in using and transforming categories. As we shall now highlight, the neglect of intra-dynamics *within* categories is one of the shortcomings of McCall's epistemological and methodological reconstruction of intersectionality.

2.4. 'Endo': the becoming of categories

Taken together, the anti-, intra- and intercategorical perspectives constitute a rich epistemological and methodological toolkit with which to analyse how social categories contribute to creating specific social positions that generate hierarchies, asymmetries of power, privileges and exclusions. All of them focus on how the intersection of different categories defines a social location that binds the action of individuals and groups. This aspect is central in the analysis of the forms of exclusion, and constitutes one of the main contributions of the idea of intersectionality. Nonetheless, on taking advantage of post-structuralist reflections, it is possible to broaden the field of analysis of intersectionality by focusing attention on the *processes* that take place at the intersection sites, thus highlighting the dynamic character, both binding and enabling, of social categories (Choo and Ferree 2010). Rather than focusing on the subjective identities created by intersections, with the risk of reification and excessive generalization, the focus here is on how it is precisely the complexity of intersections that creates forms of discipline, asymmetries, exclusions but also opens up spaces for individual agency and collective action, transforming the meaning, the role and the malleability of categories according to their complex intertwining.

_____

If one wants to grasp the dynamic character of the intersections, intercategorical analysis is insufficient because it cannot effectively highlight how the single categories function in different intersections. This objective requires a comparative approach which analyses how the different intersections define, in different ways, the meaning socially attributed to the single categories and to the spaces of action or to the constraints that this attribution of meaning produces. A comparison is needed both for the different categories within the intersections and among the various intersections to show the variability of the effects of the categorizations, their changeability in interactions, and their dependence on situational contingencies. It also helps to highlight how the complexity of the intersections of the different categories allows the subjects to gain room for manoeuvre to define the meaning of the individual categories in the different interactions and situations. This happens because each category makes sense in relation to the others considered significant in the specific situations in which people find themselves acting.

In other words, it means highlighting how being a woman takes on different meanings in relation not only to other categories – such as being poor or rich, with light or dark skin – but also to the situations and relationships in which a woman is inserted (Yuval-Davis 2011a). It means that being a poor young dark-skinned woman does not define a static and univocal identity because the gender dimension – as well as the others – can assume different meanings – and can be interpreted by subjects in different ways – if she, for example, must interact with the welfare systems, undergo a job interview, carry out political activity in a feminist group, or date a potential partner. Moreover, gender is a fluid concept, and people can give it different meanings in different contexts: it can be conflated with biological sex or can be defined by behaviours, expressions, preferences, appearances, lifestyles; or it can be defined by rules, norms, and institutions. The meaning that it assumes in a specific situation is given by the intertwining with other categories, power relations, and individual agency.

This helps to avoid the essentialization of social categories that considers them immutable without paying attention to the processes by which categories are produced. Categories cannot be taken for granted: they are historicized, and they have a contextual use. Blackness or womanhood are not natural entities, nor do they have a homogeneous and stable status; rather, they are social constructs with a political status that changes according to time and space (history and location). The process of signification involving categories is unstable and always located in contexts with different forms of power relations. However, at a given historical time there is often a conflation between some vectors, such as gender and ethnicity, in terms of advantage or disadvantage (Colombo and Rebughini 2016).

At the same time, the *endocategorical* perspective helps to conduct a comparative analysis among different individuals by considering how single individuals situated at a specific intersection of structural categories give meaning to their specific social location and act accordingly. In this case, categories emerge as always ambivalent, contingent, and under construction, so that a comparative analysis can show how different categories may create more or less space for action, mediation and resistance for different subjects, in different contexts. Here categories do not define subjects but are instead political tools in a power/knowledge dynamic: that is, they help the agent to understand and give sense to the situation. The agent is subjected to the categories but can partially play with them; consequently, the focus is on the way in which each individual produces, experiences, undergoes, suffers and resists categories. Hence, focusing on endocategorical complexity and dynamics helps to highlight how people can manage categories, transforming and translating them. It helps to shed light on the subjective 'situated uses' of categories, and on the space of manoeuvre that the various structural dimensions have left open in that specific social location. The way in which both

_____

'lay' people and researchers interact with categories shows that they are not stable and paradigmatic references. Instead, they are always under construction, in spite of their structural effects.

From a methodological point of view, it is necessary to conduct a qualitative comparative analysis that combines the significant methodological aspects of the intra- and intercategorical approach. From the intercategorical approach it is useful to keep the comparative dimension among structural categories in order to study how they interact in specific ways to create distinctive sets of constraints and opportunities. Comparing different forms of intersection enables the researcher to grasp the dynamic character of the categories and how they are always defined in relation to the other categories and to the context of action. Multi-site ethnography and comparative case studies seem to be the best tools for this purpose because they also allow the introduction of a temporal dimension that captures the changes over time of the interaction among the different categories and different intersections, thereby also capturing the dynamism of the constraints that structure the relationship and the forms of adaptation, resistance, tactical and strategic uses that people may make of the various categories. The usefulness of a preliminary quantitative analysis should not be excluded, since it makes it possible to highlight the forms of intersection that actually acquire meaning in relation to the topic analysed. This enables the researcher to have accountable criteria with which to choose the intersections and the categories to be compared.

From the intracategorical approach it is useful to keep the in-depth analysis of how individuals, located at specific intersections of structural categories, give meaning to their social location and act accordingly. The different social locations make it possible for people to 'interpret' and 'perform' – within the limits imposed by the specific situation – the different categorizations and identifications that define their social location. Indeed, adding intercategorical and intracategorical suggestions helps "to deliver a convincing methodological convergence between

structural categories derived from social theory and the analysis of sociocultural practices" (Bürkner 2012, 191). This is a way to gain better understanding of the interaction between agency and structural constraints. It makes it possible to depict a more complex framework for social action in which both a rigid structural determinism and a naïve emphasis on individual creativity or resistance are replaced by a process-centred perspective (Choo and Ferree 2010).

3. Conclusion

Drawing on the seminal article by Leslie McCall, we have tried to go a step further in order to better highlight intersectionality as an epistemological tool and its intertwining with methodological choices. We have attempted to combine the potential of the intra- and intercategorical approaches, minimizing their limits, and considered intersectionality as an instrument to study agency in complex social environments characterized by different forms of categorization. What we have provisionally termed *endocategorical* is neither the matrix of domination nor a vanishing form of multiple-identity.

On the contrary, it is a way to take the following factors seriously at the same time: a) the caveat of the anticategorical perspective, to avoid the reification of categories and analyse their dynamics, which are socially and historically situated, and reciprocally constituted; b) the ability of the intracategorical perspective to analyse in depth the subjective experience of categorizations, paying attention to how the subjects act starting from particular social positions that determine the constraints on them but which also constitute their resources for action; c) the comparative perspective of the intercategorical approach, highlighting how the categories assume different meanings and binding force according to the situations, contexts and agentive capacities of the subjects. What we call an *endocat-*

_____

egorical stance cumulates such capabilities, and it can broaden the field of research to which the intersectional perspective is applied by including – in addition to the analysis of discrimination and oppression – that of the social construction of intersections, how they act by orienting and disciplining behaviours, how they define the space for agency – that is, analysis of the interpretation of, resistance to, and transformation of the processes of categorization.

Because the intersectionality approach seeks to highlight the complexity and the changeability of the effect of the intertwining of different social categorizations, it can hardly be reduced to a single methodology. From a methodological point of view, taking into account that different methodologies produce different kinds of substantive knowledge about what happens in the intersection means exploring the possibility of mixed methods. Consequently, it is possible to outline different methodological combinations for intersectional research in terms of an endocategorical approach.

For example, to analyse the *strength* of given forms of intersecting categorizations in terms of social location, the analysis should focus on the distribution of power, as in the case of Hill-Collins' 'matrix of domination'. People can try to hide or use to their advantage some forms of categorization only in relation to the salience these forms assume in specific contexts. In order to assess how and to what extent the 'force' or 'rigidity' of the categories makes a difference, and the room for manoeuvre left by institutionalized categories, a quantitative methodology is well suited to the task. More specifically, because in the intersection a category is influenced by other categories, the tools of multiplicative analysis (logistic regression, multilevel models and fsQCA) can be useful. Instead, analysing the subjects' capacity to deal with the different categories means focusing on personal capacities, such as the individual's skilfulness in attuning with the expectations of the context. Understanding the individual's capacity to make the best use of the mix of categories that define social locations, identities, and the capacity to 'know the

right code' – such as showing the right *habitus*, and an acceptable 'face' – is crucial to highlight the processes of domination, the definition of privileges, and the effective conditions that promote or hinder a person's agency. In this case, in order to explore the complex relationship between agency and structural restraints, mix methods, with a major role of qualitative research, can be the only viable solution.

To sum up, when dealing with intersectionality, one should consider at the same time the epistemological and the methodological sides of the analysis, because these two sides – as always, but more than ever in intersectional approach – influence each other. In the foregoing discussion, we have tried to pave the way to a mixed-method perspective in dealing with complex intersections, as they have been analysed in the equally complex literature on the topic.

References

Anthias, F. (2021), *Translocational Belongings: Intersectional Dilemmas and social inequalities*, New York, Routledge.

Bagilhole, B. (2010), Apply the Lens of Intersectionality to UK Equal Opportunities and Diversity Policies, in *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences*, vol. 27, no.3, pp. 263-271.

Bauer, G.R., Churchill, S.M., Mahendran M., Walwyn, C., Lizotte, D., and Villa-Rueda, A.A. (2021), Intersectionality in quantitative research: A systematic review of its emergence and applications of theory and methods, in *SSM – Population Health*, 14, 100798, pp. 1-14 - https://doi.org/ 10.1016/j.ssmph.2021.100798

Bowleg, L. (2012), The problem with the phrase women and minorities: intersectionality-an important theoretical framework for public health, in *Am J Public*

_____

Health, vol. 102, no. 7, pp. 1267-73 - https://doi.org/ 10.2105/AJPH.2012.300750

Bürkner, H-J. (2012), Intersectionality: How Gender Studies Might Inspire the Analysis of Social Inequalities among Migrants, in *Population, Space and Place*, vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 181-195.

Carastathis, A. (2014), The Concept of Intersectionality in Feminist Theory, in *Philosoply Compass*, vol. 9, no. 5, pp. 304-314.

Choo, H.Y., and Ferree, M.M. (2010), Practicing Intersectionality in Sociological Research: A Critical Analysis of Inclusion, Interactions, and Institutions in the Study of Inequality, in *Sociological Theory*, vol. 28, no. 2, pp. 129-149.

Colombo, E., and Rebughini, P. (2016), Intersectionality and beyond, in *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, vol. 57, no. 3, pp. 439-459.

Crenshaw, K. (1989), Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,in *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, no. 140, pp. 139-167.

Davis, K. (2020), Who owns intersectionality? Some reflections on feminist debates on how theory travels, in *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 113 –127.

Davis, K., and Lutz, H. (2022), "Intersectionality as critical method: Asking the other question", in: Davis, K., and Lutz, H. (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Intersectionality*, London and New York: Routledge.

Egeland, C., and Gressgård, R. (2007), The "Will to Empower": Managing the Complexity of the others, in *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, vol. 15, no. 4, pp. 207-219 - https://doi.org/ 10.1080/08038740701646689

Fehrenbacher, A.E., and Patel, D. (2020), Translating the theory of intersectionality into quantitative and mixed methods for empirical gender transformative

research on health, in *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, vol. 22, no. S1, pp. 145-160 - https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2019.1671494.

Fraser, N. (1997), *Justice Interruptus*, New York, Routledge.

Hancock, A-M. (2013), Empirical Intersectionality: A Tale of Two Approaches, in *UC Irvine Law Review*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 259-296.

Haraway, D. (1988), Situated knowledges: the science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective, in *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 575–599.

Harding, S (1991), *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives*, New York, Cornell University Press.

Heyse, P. (2010), Deconstructing Fixed Identities: An Intersectional Analysis of Russian-speaking Female Marriage Migrants' Self-representations, in *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 65-80.

Hill-Collins, P. (2019), *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*, Durham, Duke University Press.

hooks b. (1991), *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, London, Turnaround.

Lutz, H. (2016), Intersectionality's amazing journey: toleration, adaptation and appropriation, in *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, vol, 57, no. 3, pp. 421-437.

Lutz, H., Herrera-Vivar M.T., and Supik, L. (eds.) (2011), *Framing Intersectionality: Debates on a multi-faceted concept in Gender Studies,* Farnham, Ashgate.

Lykke, N. (2010), *Feminist Studies. A Guide to Intersectional Theory, Methodology and Writing*, New York, Routledge.

McCall, L. (2005), The Complexity of Intersectionality, in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 1771-1800.

McDowell, L. (2008), Thinking through work: Complex inequalities, constructions of difference and trans-national migrants, in *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 491-507.

Nash, J. (2008), Rethinking Intersectionality, in *Feminist Review*, vol. 89, no. 1, pp. 1-15.

Purkayastha, B. (2010), Interrogating Intersectionality: Contemporary Globalization and Racialised Gendering in the Lives of Highly Educated South Asian American and their Children, in *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, vol. 31, no. 1, pp. 29-47.

Rebughini, P. (2021), Agency in intersectionality. Towards a method for studying the situatedness of action, in *SOCIO*, n. 15, pp. 189-205.

Schudde, L. (2018), Heterogeneous Effects in Education: The Promise and Challenge of Incorporating Intersectionality Into Quantitative Methodological Approaches, in *Review of Research in Education*, vol. 42, no. 1, pp. 72-92 - https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X18759040

Spierings, N. (2012), The inclusion of quantitative techniques and diversity in the mainstream of feminist research, in *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3, pp. 331-347 - https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506812443621

Walby S., Amstrong, J., and Strid, S. (2012), Multiple Intersectionality: Inequalities in Social Theory, in *Sociology*, vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 224-240 - https://doi.org/10.1177/ 0038038511416164

Yuval-Davis N. (2006), Intersectionality and Feminist Politics, in *European Journal of Women's Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3, pp. 193-209 - https://doi.org/10.1177/ 1350506806065752

Yuval-Davis, N. (2011a), *The Politics of Belonging. Intersectional Contestations*, London, Sage.

Yuval-Davis, N. (2011b), "Beyond the Recognition and Re-distribution Dichotomy: Intersectionality and Stratification", in Lutz, H., Herrera Vivar, M.T., and Supik, L. (eds.), *Framing Intersectionality. Debates on a Multi-Faceted Concept in Gender Studies*, London, Routledge.